THE SIMPLIFICATION OF GOD
I Corinthians 1:20-25
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

It takes awhile for something as incredible as the birth of Jesus to sink in. One day won't do it. In fact, the theological claim the church makes on December 25 is so incredible, it is nearly unapproachable. And so we are inclined to reduce its magnitude, to fasten on to one or another aspect of the celebration, making an idol of a portion of the truth, which is how all idolatries begin. Thus, people who have not given one solitary adult thought to the idea of following Jesus, will, once again, fawn all over the baby of Bethlehem. The season of Advent is, in my mind, one of the early church's better ideas. It is an opportunity to think intentionally about both the enormity and the simplicity of the claim we make. For thoughtful people there is, at the heart of the matter, a major theological problem. We are about to make a claim which, quite simply, staggers both the intellect and the imagination. We are about to say that God - the Holy - the Divine - the Mysterium Tremendum - pursued by philosophers, artists, and mystics since time began, was intimately involved in the labor and delivery of an unmarried Jewish girl 2,000 years ago.

There are some problems of historical documentation, to say the least. The birth is recorded no where. No one noticed particularly, but several scruffy shepherds and a curious trio of astrologers from Babylon.

Historical documentation is the least of our problems, however. The major concern is theological or philosophical. It is what we might call, basic. All the best thinkers have understood that human thought about God is ultimately a contradiction in terms. The object of the inquiry is the Infinite, and the only tool we have with which to do our inquiring is an all too finite mind. The object of the search is also the subject: that is, the one we seek, created the ones doing the seeking.

Karl Barth, perhaps the most important Christian thinker of the century understood exactly the dilemma we are considering. Barth was a very prolific scholar. His 12 volume theology, Church Dogmatics, is one of the high achievements of Christian scholarship. It is also a lot of books. In an interview shortly before he died, Barth was asked about his prodigious output. He said, "The angels laugh at Old Karl. They see him huffing and puffing, pushing his cart loaded with all his books, and they laugh."

How do you know who the baby was? How do you know any of it is true? As a matter of fact, how do you know anything is red? Oh, you can know that you have hands and feet: and you can know for sure that the toast and coffee on the breakfast table is real, and there is no question about the existence of the chair on which you sit. You can rely on your senses to establish what is real and what is unreal. Some reality may be touched, or pushed, or caressed: a table, a hand of a beloved. Some may be heard - the "Hallelujah Chorus", a baby's cry. Some may be felt - a brisk ocean breeze. You and I know what we sense but is that all? Does reality stop with the nerve endings in our finger tips, our ears and eyes? The people who live by the scientific method tell us that it is not intended to be exclusive. Most contemporary scientists are saying that there is reality outside the scientific ability to weigh, measure, and analyze. It's the lay perple, those of us who know a little bit about science, who conclude that if it isn't measurable, it isn't real.

A major portion of life, in fact a very human portion, simply will not be analyzed by the rules of science. A slide projected on a screen has reality until someone turns the lights on to see it better, and then it disappears. I was at Port Columbus one evening this week and joined thousands of other people who were meeting loved ones visiting or coming home for Thanksgiving. The airport was literally full of happy people. There were babies and grannies and students and lovers. One earnest young man was there with roses for a special returning passenger. All ages, all shapes, all stations were hugging and greeting. It was heart-warming - but it won't last for long under the bright light of reason. The young man with flowers was, of course, simply answering his hormones. The young couple meeting parents were expressing their continuing need for parental validation: the older couple welcoming the business woman daughter were expressing their longing for immortality. The reason they were all there - affection - love - doesn't have much documentable reality. You can't know it - as you might know the existence of the plastic seats at the airport.

Unless there is a category of reality which doesn't fit our rules; or, put another way, unless our rules are so hopelessly limited by our own finiteness our humanity, that they exclude a lot of reality.

Again, the best of us have always understood that: the artists, the poets, the philosophers, the believers. In fact, the best and brightest of us are the first to understand our limitations as we approach that which is without limitation.

In a recent Christian Century editorial, Ronald Goetz pointed out that Socrates insisted that his only claim to being the wisest man in Greece lay in the fact that he knew nothing, while everyone else was in the same boat, but claimed to have the truth. (C.C., 11/24/82) Goetz suggests that thoughtful Christians will, on occasion, find themselves dumbfounded by their own affirmations. He calls that familiar state a "higher ignorance". He writes: "This higher ignorance born of intellectual daring, the daring to insist that the unseen things that give meaning and significance to life are real." (ibid.)

St. Paul spoke to the issue memorably in the preface to his first letter to the early church in Corinth. The people of Corinth enjoyed the culture of Greece. They were reasonable people. Paul was a scholarly doctor of the law. He understood his religion: he was good at thinking academically about it. Paul knew and wrote to the Corinthian Christians, however, that there was more to the Gospel than ideas. In point of fact, the claim that Jesus, who was crucified, was the Messiah, was not being received very well by the people who expected the anncinted one to look a little more regal, say like King David or better yet, Solomon. And to those accustomed to being reasonable above all else, the whole thing seemed foolish. The Greek thinkers were far more comfortable with God as a proposition, a metaphor for the oneness of the supreme good. But a crucified Jewish carpenter - a baby in a crib? Foolishness!

So we balk at the simplicity of it sometimes. Like the Corinthian intellectuals, we are more comfoortable with God as an academic proposition, a philosophic hypotheses. We are at home thinking about God in terms of "the Good, the Beautiful, the Moral Imperative, the First Cause, or even the Ground of all Being."

And Advent says to us: stop, put the text books down and see the simplification of God for a moment.

Malcolm Muggeridge wrote about the birth of Jesus: "It is sublimely simple, a transcendental soap-opera going on century after century and touching enumerable hearts: from some bleak, lonely soul seeking a hand to hold when all else have been withdrawn, to vast choruses of joyful believers singing their glories. (Jesus, p. 17)

The next four weeks, weeks which will be happy, hectic, full of unusual activity and unusual complexity, are for the purpose of preparing us for the simplification of God. God has called us to be his people in a time and place which make it neither easy, nor simple. There are difficult problems: complex issues; there are strategies to be devised, plans to be made, programs to be launched. For each of us, there are people to be loved, difficult and hard choices to be made, causes to be advocated.

But here, as we move through days of Advent, it will be sublimely simple. A new-born child, a birth, a mother and father - a God who loves and who wants that love known and experienced and celebrated enough to express it in its magnificant simplicity.

Come, thou long expected Jesus
Born a child and yet a King
Born to reign in us forever
Now thy gracious kingdom living. Amen.